

Why GAO Did This Study

Veterans from historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups comprised almost 24 percent of the total veteran population in 2017, according to a VA report. By 2045, this group of veterans will make up over 36 percent of all living veterans, according to VA projections.

Public Law 117-66 includes a provision for GAO to assess whether there are racial and ethnic disparities with respect to disability compensation, among other areas. This report examines the extent to which (1) VA has taken steps to collect and assess data about the racial and ethnic composition of veterans who may apply for disability compensation; and (2) racial and ethnic disparities exist in the provision of compensation, and what factors could contribute to disparate outcomes.

GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and VA policies; analyzed VA's claims data by race, ethnicity, and sex from fiscal year 2010 through 2020 (the most recent full year of data available); and interviewed VA officials and representatives from a VA advisory group and selected veterans service organizations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to VA, including that it develop a plan to address limitations with its race and ethnicity data, and to conduct a comprehensive assessment of disability compensation to identify the root causes that could contribute to racial and ethnic disparities. VA agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-23-106097](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth H. Curda at (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov.

VA DISABILITY BENEFITS

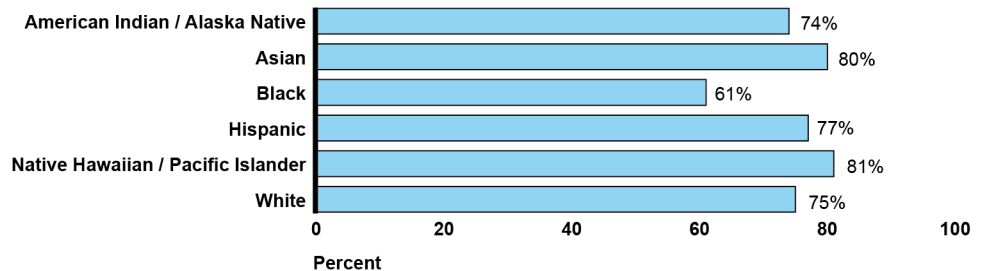
Actions Needed to Further Examine Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Compensation

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has taken steps to improve how it collects race and ethnicity data to understand the experiences of veterans who may apply for disability compensation through the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). For example, VA created a working group that specifically focused on improving demographic data collection. VA's collection efforts could enhance the data available to VBA to assess racial and ethnic disparities in disability compensation. However, VA has not developed a documented plan for how it will improve the availability of data for certain racial and ethnic groups who may not be accessing VA services and benefits. Without a plan to identify and document concrete actions, VA will not have the data it needs to ensure veterans are treated equitably.

GAO's analysis of fiscal year 2010 through 2020 compared initial claims approval rates for all racial and ethnic groups to Non-Hispanic White (White) veterans—the largest group with decisions. GAO found that Non-Hispanic Black or African American (Black) veterans had the lowest approval rate among all groups (see figure). Similarly, GAO's analysis of selected medical conditions most frequently decided by VA found that differences in approval rates were particularly prominent between Black male and White male veterans, with Black male veterans' rates being 3 to 22 percentage points lower. These differences were prevalent for nine of the 10 conditions GAO analyzed such as tinnitus and posttraumatic stress disorder. VBA has conducted studies on racial and ethnic disparities in disability compensation for some conditions and found disparities. However, it has not comprehensively studied the root causes of the disparities it has found or potential disparities in the provisions of compensation more broadly. As a result, VA lacks the information it needs to ensure equitable decisions.

VA Disability Compensation Approval Rates for Initial Claims, by Race and Ethnicity (Fiscal Years 2010–2020)



Source: GAO analysis of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) data. | [GAO-23-106097](#)

Note: GAO grouped individuals of Hispanic ethnicity under that designation regardless of race.